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WHY HASHEM PASKENED LIKE ZIONISM, AND WHY THAT SHOULD WORRY RELIGIOUS ZIONISTS

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Tanakh assumes the radical proposition that G-d's choices are limited by human freedom. He spoke and the world came into being; but once He created us, some avenues of Divine speech were foreclosed.

He cannot speak into existence a world that we cannot somehow rationalize as coherent with the world as it existed before then. Perhaps more importantly, He cannot speak into existence a world in which human beings chose differently than we in fact chose.

This essay begins with great trepidation to develop this idea in the context of contemporary Religious Zionism. I say "begins" advisedly; we'll merely dip our toes in a vast theological ocean or abyss. In fact, we'll barely get to Zionism at all, as we need to lay a foundation via two Tanakh analyses, and those analyses will be presented telegraphically. I hope nonetheless that my direction is clear, and that you'll be inspired to follow or lead me further down this road. (Or to tell me why I'm badly wrong. And for anyone reading under duress because you need a dvar Torah on the parshah – that's in here as well.)

ANALYSIS 1: ELIJAHU

In I Kings 17:1, Eliyahu HaNavi declares: "*By the Living G-d before Whom I have stood, there will be no dew or rain in these years except as I say so!*" Let's assume reasonably that Eliyahu's self-description is wholly credible to his audience. G-d can choose whether or not to uphold Eliyahu's assertion of power. But He cannot undo Eliyahu's declaration, and therefore, He cannot undermine Eliyahu without diminishing His own public stature.

It takes quite some chutzpah to be Eliyahu.

Eliyahu "wins" his dare, in a sense, for a while. But eventually, G-d finds the cost too high. Chazal depict Him as responding by forcing Eliyahu to choose between the rain key and the resurrection key. Eliyahu surrenders the rain key.

But the pattern of the relationship is set. Eliyahu surrenders the key in a way that "forces" G-d to back him up again, in

the prophets' duel at Carmel. Whether that event significantly undermines Baal-worship in the long-term is not clear. What is clear, however, is that it made it impossible to convince the Jews that sacrifices to G-d could not be brought outside the Temple. The *bamot* will not be eliminated, despite the prohibition in Devarim 12:9. Speaking of which:

ANALYSIS #2: DOVID AND SHLOMOH

The Jews make no effort to build a Temple when first entering the Land. But as their loose tribal confederation matures into empire, Dovid Hamelekh expresses a new-felt incongruity to Natan Hanavi: "Observe, please, that I am dwelling in a house of cedar, while the Ark of The Elokim dwells within curtains." The psychological need for a Temple arises out of the anthropomorphic projection onto G-d of a desire to keep up with the Joneses.

G-d does not allow Dovid to build the Temple; or if we accept RADAK's reading, Dovid impressively reconsiders in the light of a troubled conscience. Not I think a guilty conscience – more along the lines of "terrible deeds had to be done", but with a genuine awareness that they were terrible. He hopes that his son can reap the benefits of those deeds without being shadowed by them. Here is how he expresses this hope to Shlomoh (Divrei HaYamim 1:22:7-9):

Dovid said to Shlomoh his son:

My son,

I had it in my heart to build a house for the sake of Hashem my Elokim.

But the word of Hashem came upon me as follows:

You have shed blood in abundance, and you have made great wars;

You must not build a house for My sake, because you have shed much blood to the ground before Me."

Behold a son born to you;

He will be a man of *menuchah/rest* and I will give him rest from all his surrounding enemies;

For his name will be Shlomoh, and I will place *shalom/peace* and quiet over Israel in his days.

נִיאֲמַר דָּוִד לְשִׁלְמֹה בֶּן־יְדִי

אֲנִי הִיָּה עִם-לִבִּי לְבָנוֹת בְּיַת לְשִׁם יְקִיָּה אֶ-לֹהֵי: וְיֵהְיֶה עָלַי דְּבַר-יְקִיָּה לְאֹמֵר

דָּם לַרֶב שְׂפָכֶת וּמִלֻּחְמוֹת גְּדִלוֹת עֲשִׂית לֹא־תִבְנֶה בַּיִת לַשָּׁמַי
 כִּי דַמִּים רַבִּים שְׂפָכֶת אֶרְצָה לִפְנֵי:
 הִנֵּה־בָּן נוֹלָד לָךְ
 הוּא יְהִי אִישׁ מְנוּחָה
 וְהִנְחֹתִי לוֹ מִקְל־אוֹיְבָיו מִסָּבִיב
 כִּי שְׁלֹמֹה יְהִי שְׁמוֹ וְשָׁלוֹם וְשִׁקְט אֲתֵן עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּיָמָיו:

Dovid plainly projects Shlomoh's reign as the fulfillment of an implicit promise in Devarim 12:7-9:

For you have not come yet, even now,
 to the *menuchah/resting-place* and *nachalah/homestead*
 that Hashem your Elokim will give you.

You will cross the Jordan
 and dwell in the Land

which Hashem your Elokim is deeding to you.

He will give you rest from all your enemies surrounding

You will dwell securely.

Then the place which Hashem your Elokim will choose to lodge

His Name there –

To there you will bring everything that I command you –
 your *olahs* and your *zevachs* and your *maasers* and the *terumot*
 of your hands,

and all the chosen-by-oath that you will dedicate-by-oath to

Hashem.

כִּי לֹא־בָאתֶם עַד־עֲתָה

אֶל־הַמְנוּחָה וְאֶל־הַנְּחִלָּה

אֲשֶׁר־מִנַּח אֶל־יְהוָה גְּבוּלָה:

וַעֲבַרְתֶּם אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן

וַיִּשְׁבְּתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ

אֲשֶׁר־יִקְנֶה לְיְהוָה מִנְחֵי אֲתֶם

וְהִנִּיחַ לָכֶם מִקְל־אוֹיְבֵיכֶם מִסָּבִיב

וַיִּשְׁבְּתֶם־בְּטָח:

וְהָיָה הַמְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־יִבְחַר יְהוָה לְיְהוָה בּוֹ לְשִׁבְּתוֹ שְׁמוֹ שָׁם –

שָׁמָּה תָּבִיאוּ אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְה אֲתֶם:

עוֹלֹתֵיכֶם וְזִבְחֵיכֶם מַעֲשֵׂי־יָדַיְכֶם וְתִרְמַת יִדְבְּכֶם

וְכָל מִבְּחַר נְדָרֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר תִּדְּרוּ לַיהוָה:

The halakhic meaning of Devarim is that the Jews will be permitted to bring private sacrifices on private altars (only) until G-d chooses a specific place. G-d will make His choice (only) after they have reached a stage of *menuchah* and *nachalah*, peace on all borders, and psychological security.

Dovid sees these conditions as a foreshadowing of Shlomoh's reign. Shlomoh apparently sees it the same way. According to Divrei HaYamim, the building commences immediately. When it is completed, at some point early in Shlomoh's reign, G-d chooses to lodge His name there.

But was it a *lekhatchilah* choice? Dovid had declared publicly that G-d had told him that Shlomoh would build the Temple, and Shlomoh had enthusiastically followed through. What would have happened had He then not responded to

Shlomoh's prayer and ignored the Temple? What if He had no longer given them “*rest from all their enemies surrounding*”?

I suspect that impartial readers ignorant of history would understand Devarim 12:9 as a promise that building the Temple would usher in an era of permanent peace. But we know sadly that this was not to be. Yet what sense does it make to build a Temple, with permanent halakhic implications such as the ban on sacrificing elsewhere, in response to a temporary political condition?

I suspect as well that such readers would assume that a major purpose of banning extra-Temple sacrifice would be to leave no space for idolatry. Yet Chazal say, with good textual reason, that Shlomoh's concessions to idolatry began on the very day the Temple was completed!

By the time you read this (Friday August 30, 2024), I hope to have released an audio shiur on Taking Responsibility for Torah that begins exploring this question via the Tannaitic dispute about whether “*the menuchah/rest and nachalah/homestead*” in Devarim 12:7 refers to the Mikdash, the Mishkan at Shiloh, or both, and if both, in which order. But here we need to segue to the present.

APPLICATION: RELIGIOUS ZIONISM

Rav Soloveichik z”l explained his affiliation with Mizrachi as rooted in a sense that G-d had paskened like Zionism, via history. I understand this to be a claim, articulated powerfully by Professor David Berger, that the success of Zionism represents too seismic a shift in Jewish experience to be meaningless. The only plausible interpretations are that it is enormously positive, or that it is diabolical, and I prefer not to give the devil any sort of due.

I suggest that we can look at Zionists, and especially religious Zionists, as following Eliyahu, Dovid and Shlomoh by entangling their own fate with G-d's reputation.

The establishment of the State was no more inevitable than G-d choosing to have His Presence lodge in the Temple, or enforcing Eliyahu's drought. Yet what would have happened to any narrative of G-d and His chosen people had He allowed the attempt to fail, in the terrible shadow of the Shoah?

It's hard to argue with success; that's essentially the Rav's point. But it is very possible to learn the wrong lessons from success.

The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, www.torahleadership.org, which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.

For example: I suggest that Shlomoh took G-d's endorsement of the Temple as meaning that his job was done. But the Temple was actually built prematurely. G-d chose to endorse it as the better of His alternatives, and in the hope that Shlomoh's further choices would bring Devarim to fruition. In the end, the Temple's religious effects faded in Shlomoh's lifetime; the empire ended in secession almost immediately after his death; and the Temple itself was eventually destroyed.

For example: I suggest that Eliyahu took his first success as meaning that G-d would always back him up. He did not understand that G-d has His reasons for not simply using power to convince, or more deeply, that power never convinces. Nor did he understand that once G-d is perceived as endorsing a violation of the law in one case, that law will likely never be obeyed again in any case.

Religious Zionists strive for a secure and permanent State, and a State and world that follow ethical norms. I pray we take these examples to heart. While I am leery of claiming Torah support for specific policies, Deborah Klapper convinced me that I need to end by laying out what I see as practical implications of the Torah framework above.

We must not follow Shlomoh's mistake of believing that because Zionism succeeded in 1948, the State of Israel will inevitably become a model society and endure forever. Specifically, we must recognize that, just as the Beit HaMikdash carries with it the *yetzer hora* of idolatry, statehood carries with it the *yetzer hora* of power, which can express itself against citizens and noncitizens, Jews and nonJews.

We must also not follow Eliyahu's mistake of believing that public figures can flout the law for a perceived greater good, and then expect that same law to be enforced generally. Eliyahu's grand gesture at Mount Carmel led to the permanence of private altars, and thus inevitably to religious chaos; government ministers defying the law will inevitably lead to the permanence of private violence and political chaos.

Eliyahu did not make the worse mistake of endorsing some private altars and not others. At the very, very least, Religious Zionists must loudly, publicly, and unambiguously condemn all private violence by any citizen against anyone. It is fine and fair to complain loudly when the state provides insufficient security for its Jewish citizens; that is surely a failure of Zionism, of which October 7 was a terrifying instance, which

extended to nonJewish citizens as well, but unconstrained private violence by Jews against nonJews in a Jewish state will lead inevitably to the death of any Zionism worth having, or deserving of Divine Providence.

Shabbat shalom!

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